

# The Evolution of Somatic IFS

by Susan McConnell, MA, CHT

In Chicago in the early '80s, one rarely heard the words *body* and *mind* in the same sentence. Now those words are a common tagline for selling products from cosmetics to vacation homes. When paradigm shifts show up in advertising, we can be confident that the 500-year tradition of hierarchical fragmentation and specialization that has affected all our Western social institutions is being uprooted. Having had one foot in each of these worlds, I am grateful that the field of psychotherapy is participating in the emergence of this shift.

But institutions shift with glacial speed, and despite recent findings in the field of neuroscience, the brain and the head are still exclusively thought of as the territory of psychotherapy. Patients with mental illness are said to need their “heads shrunked.” Even the term *mental illness* is reductionist. I will use the term *bodymind* to point toward the fundamental integrity of

these aspects of human experience, and *somatic* to refer to our subjective experience of our bodies.

As a trainer for the Center for Self Leadership, I have been teaching the Internal Family Systems Model of psychotherapy in the United States and in Europe. Developed by Dick Schwartz, IFS is a mind/body psychotherapy that normalizes multiplicity of the mind and views each person as having a Self that the therapist helps to uncover so it can fully lead the system of parts.

When I initially began to teach the IFS Model with Dick in 1997, it was important to me as a

body-centered therapist to know I could include the body fully at every step of the process. Dick assured me that he welcomed my contribution. With his encouragement, I grew an arm off the solid trunk of IFS—Somatic IFS. Somatic IFS is a synthesis of 40 years of study, teaching, and clinical practice defined by attempts to integrate what Descartes and other philosophers tried to keep in separate realms.

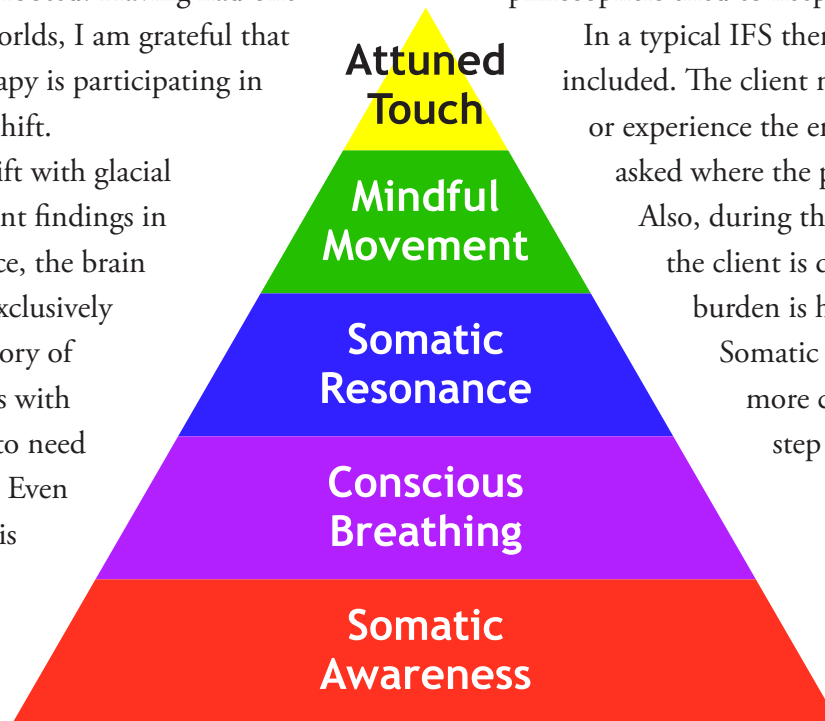
In a typical IFS therapy session, the body is included. The client may hear or see the part, or experience the emotions of a part, and is asked where the part resides in the body.

Also, during the unburdening process, the client is directed to find where the burden is held in or around the body.

Somatic IFS includes the body more comprehensively, in every step of the process.

My experience is that transcending the dualism of mind and body with my IFS clients has enhanced and deepened the effectiveness of

this model. Years of exploring IFS and the body with my clients and students has revealed the body to be an invaluable resource for grounding in Self energy, for accessing and witnessing parts, and for observing and anchoring numerous somatic shifts with each transformation. My shifting relationship with my own body, mining the wisdom in the depths of my tissues and cells, has been a vital, ongoing part of the development of Somatic IFS. My personal experience with healing my own mind/body splits and embodying my internal family has shown me that a deep



exploration of the relationship of mind and body leads us to the spiritual realms.

As Somatic IFS has evolved over the last five years, it has grown beyond simply including the body in the steps of the process. Attending to the inherent intelligence of the body has a powerful affect, and the body has taught us a great deal about ourselves, others, and our relationships to each other and to the Whole that informs the process of psychotherapy. It is clear that when engaging in the process of psychotherapy, we are delving into a somatic state of relatedness as physiological as breathing, birthing, and dying. A psychotherapy that doesn't fully include the somatic aspects of the person limits the fullest potential for transformation.

The unity of body and mind becomes more than a concept—it is a lived experience. This lived experience is transformative for us as individuals and for the

culture as a whole. As products of Western thought, having been shaped by these institutions, we have parts whose core beliefs reflect these views. We have inherited the legacies of passive and oppressive relationships to our bodies. We have parts that view our bodies as commodities, as objects, and as a means to an end. Our bodies have been exiled, numbed, and manipulated. We cannot have full access to our Self energy if it is not embodied.

Somatic IFS presents five tools that lead to Embodied Self Energy. The foundational tool is Somatic Awareness. Resting on that pyramid base is Conscious Breathing. On top of that is Resonance, which I sometimes refer to as Cellular Resonance, Limbic Resonance, or Somatic Resonance. With this tool we move more fully into the relational realm. Mindful Movement rests on Resonance, and Attuned Touch is at the apex.